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ABSTRACT

At first glance, charter districts seem to offer an inventive way to conduct the business of schooling. While charter schools extend a new, but relatively small, building-focused alternative to educational consumers, charter districts have the potential to free public education at a much larger level and with a more comprehensive scope. This paper seeks to answer questions about whether a superintendent should seek charter status for an entire district and whether the opportunity should be seized, if available under state law, to convert a district to charter status. The rationale for charter districts is first explained. Next, the charter-district legislation in Michigan, Pennsylvania, California, Florida, Georgia, New Mexico, and Texas is analyzed. Third, the experiences of administrators in different charter districts are discussed and summarized. Finally, the evidence culled from their experiences is examined, suggesting that charter districts have the potential to become a major force in American education. At present, charter districts are still strongly influenced by community traditions and conservative parent-held values. These factors combine in complex ways with the district's desire for change and the need to conduct it in politically safe ways. The paper concludes with a list of charter districts nationwide. (RT)

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Charter Districts: Much Fuss, Little Gain

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The Issue: Potential Impact and Value of Charter Districts
Why would a superintendent seek charter status for an entire district? Should a superintendent seize the opportunity, if available under state law, to convert a district to charter status? In this paper, we seek answers to those questions. First, we explain the rationale for charter districts. Next, we analyze the charter district legislation in different states. Third, we discuss and summarize the experiences of selected administrators in different charter districts. Finally, we examine the evidence culled from their experiences that suggests charter districts have the potential to become a major force in American education.

At first glance, charter districts seem to offer an inventive way to conduct the business of schooling. Ingenious structural and governance arrangements for existing schools could be built--along with refashioned district and school relationships. Change could occur rapidly, unencumbered by the grinding pace of a bureaucracy and a tedious, school-by-school approach to reform. Creating charter districts seems to be a natural for school system leaders.

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While charter *schools* extend a new, but relatively small, building-focused alternative to educational consumers, charter *districts* have the potential to free public education at a much larger level--and with a strikingly comprehensive scope. School administrators who struggle with burdensome regulations imposed by states and unions may want to charter their entire districts in the hope that this new status could create or facilitate:

- The proper climate for reform as a district-wide regulatory burden is lifted;
- Freedom from many state rules and regulations that stifle reform efforts;
- Allocation of resources with less state-imposed restriction on specific funds (monies go where the district wants them to go);
- District control over instructional methods and choice of materials, rather than state-mandated methods and texts.

And in return, unlike charter schools, charter districts are not threatened with complete shut-down if they do not perform to standards stipulated in the charter. The maximum penalty a charter district could experience is the revocation of the charter, or return to the previous status as a public school district that must comply

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with all state regulations and rules.

What Are Charter Districts?
A charter district comes into being when a district wants to leverage a shift in its relationship with the state and when state legislation permits such a rearrangement. As superintendents seek charter district status, legislation usually forces them to campaign for wide buy-in and involvement from a variety of constituent groups. But the campaign, sadly enough, is not one of substance--*nor can it be, given the restrictive legislation.*

Some charter districts also have charter schools within their boundaries. In Georgia, for example, where one district became a charter district and then converted back to non-charter status at the end of its charter, charter status was obtained for the district by converting each school to charter status under existing state legislation.

But we discovered that most charter districts are not districts in which all schools are charter schools. This troubles some charter schools advocates, who seek a fundamental redefinition of the relationship between the individual school and the district. To these advocates, chartering entire districts with the aim of shifting relationships with the state begs the question--and avoids the ideology--of the charter schools movement.

In fact, the reasons districts seek charter status vary, as do their student demographics and motives for broadscale change. For example, a district in Pennsylvania and another in Michigan are sometimes referred to as charter districts. These districts are both managed by private, for-profit management companies.

The Pennsylvania district was taken over by the state; it contracted with three for-profit management companies to inject choice into the system and turn around a persistent culture of failure. But state department of education personnel in Pennsylvania quickly clarify that this district is not a charter district.

The Michigan district had no recourse if it wanted to stay in operation. It had a huge deficit, combined with dismal student achievement, declining enrollments drained by area charter schools, and a state that did not want to take it over. The district's only choice was to contract with a for-profit management company in exchange for paying off the deficit. This Faustian bargain runs contrary to the notion of a district choosing freely how it wants to manage its business, its instruction, and its selection of materials. In this case, a private for-profit company makes all such decisions for the district--which had little choice after exploring other options, including annexation to neighboring districts. Furthermore, the Michigan superintendent was baffled by the description of her district as a charter district. She said, "We have to abide by all state rules and regulations and are monitored just like other public school districts in the state."

Charter Districts: The Administrators Speak
What do superintendents in charter districts relate about their experiences? In this section, we summarize their experiences. The districts we selected were chosen to showcase geographic spread as well as demographic and ideological differences. Administrators were interviewed by phone with a uniform protocol of questions.

California: Small Size, Conservative Values. California is home to five of the nation's charter districts, all of them small and rural. Three of the charter districts reside in the same county district, close to Fresno. Agrarian work and conservative values permeate all five districts.

The Kingsburg Elementary School District in Kingsburg, California, received charter status in 1996 after a principal and its superintendent at the time invested themselves in the concept. As enthusiasm grew, teachers shared the idea with parents and met with a positive reception. Mark Ford, the current superintendent, has worked in the district for most of the years of implementation.

But other factors played into the mix of administrator and teacher-driven change. The state endorsed a whole-language approach, which met with the opposition of teachers and parents in the district. Following a long series of public disgruntlement with state mandates, the district and community rebelled.

Teachers believed other instructional approaches were preferable; parents agreed. They resented a departure from the basal reader of their own youths, and viewed its imposition by the state as an additional irritant. As a result, the parents in this district were galvanized to support chartering the entire district in order to free it from the state regulatory code.

Ford views charter district status as an enormous mine of limitless potential to be tapped. While admitting to little innovative in his district in terms of pedagogical practices that have resulted from gaining charter status, the fact that approximately 60-70% of his students perform at grade level may be a result of the district choosing its own curriculum and methods. In particular, Ford points to a music program, a K-3 reading program, and a grades 5 and 6 science curriculum that has been built independently of state textbook adoptions.

Schools in this all-elementary district are divided by grade level, but that is not a shift since gaining charter status. In an unusual departure from typical grade groupings, one school serves K-2, another 3-4, yet another 5-6, and another 7-8. As a result, students develop close relationships with their peers and with teachers. They move together through the school sequence and attend high school together in another district.

Ford describes his community as "entrenched in tradition." He adds, "Some teachers are teaching the grandchildren of students they taught in the past."

Conservative values, including an emphasis on strong local control, have permeated the district's philosophy that it should make its own decisions about how monies are spent and what textbooks students should use. Building principals have control over hiring and firing, in cooperation with the central office, and do not contend with unions.
"Never have had one, and never will," Ford says emphatically.

With 2,000 students, this district has the dual advantage of close ties between students, teachers, and parents--and small size and safety. Approximately 47% of its students are Caucasian; another

47% Hispanic; and tiny percentages of African Americans, Asians, and a growing population of Sikh students dot the otherwise dominantly Hispanic and Caucasian demographics of the district. The superintendent who led the move to charter district status had to fight a number of legal battles to ensure that the district secured it. As Ford says laconically, "California law did not forbid districts to go charter, but it didn't encourage it either."

Ford believes that charter district status means freedom from regulation and speed. "You just move," he emphasizes, "you don't wait." But the ability to move rapidly has not brought about startling curricular or pedagogical innovations--although the district can point to changes.

But the overall business of educating students in this all-charter district does not proceed much differently than it did in the past. The biggest adjustment for the Kingsburg district has been expanding the boundaries of imagination to fit new and spacious parameters of possibility. "I always use the example of a racehorse that is taken out of its paddock to run a race," he says.

"The horse runs a good race under the hand of the jockey and returns to its small paddock. But when you take the same horse out to 50 acres of grass and expect it to run free, it may not move very far, because simply doesn't realize how much room it actually has."
This unexplored territory, Ford says, is a sad reminder that districts may succeed in their efforts to gain charter status but fail to examine and fulfill their many options.

In another small elementary charter district in Hanford, California, the superintendent holds a different view. Its only school (a charter school) comprises the Delta View Joint Union Elementary District--a type of charter egg encased in a charter shell. Highly rural and agrarian, charter district status (again, for the one charter school) was advanced by a group of parents in tandem with the previous superintendent who believed they could impose tighter academic standards if the district had charter status.

Dale Campbell, the superintendent, is candid about what selectivity meant to that group of parents. The district has a 75% free and reduced lunch population and is 60 percent Hispanic. Parents who were eager for charter district status tended, he notes, to be long-time residents.

"These parents felt there would be more buy-in if all parents had to sign a compact with the district," Campbell says. "We had traditional boundaries, but since charter status goes beyond those boundaries, we would have the ability to send students
Key components of the parent/district compact included the requirement that students attend school a total of at least 95% of all school days and complete all homework--a move to higher standards. But the compact is essentially toothless: There are no sanctions for parents who do not comply with the compact, Campbell notes.

Currently, the district enjoys 96% attendance with "most students handing in their work," according to Campbell. A few students have opted out of the district and attend neighboring districts, either because of a personality conflict with a teacher or because it isn't

"a good match," although Campbell emphasizes that neighboring districts have a reciprocal approach.

Campbell is not optimistic about the future of charter districts, except in the case of small districts. He points to a tightening of the standards for charter schools and charter districts in California, which he views as a positive development.

"Financially, we are in the same shape as before," he explains. "We have a little more latitude with staff, because we can hire part-time teachers without certification." These new hiring practices are not confounded by the presence of a union because the district does not have one.

While charter district status might carry a certain cachet, Campbell predicts it will be difficult for large districts to move to charter status because of the requirements of the legislation in their individual states. In California, for example, the votes of at least 50% of teachers in the district are required before the state will consider an application for charter status.

Rather than more charter districts, Campbell believes there will be an increase in individual charter schools. He says that charter districts are "good p-r," and would want to maintain his own district status, but has mixed feelings about whether he would encourage other superintendents to strive for the same status for their districts. "Charter districts can be a tool, because of the buy-in parents and their commitment to higher attendance standards," he says.

California's charter schools legislation includes only a paragraph pertinent to charter districts. The five small charter districts in California seized this paragraph and applied for charter district status. However, 50% of the teachers within the district must sign the charter petition; the petition must contain all the elements specified under California law for charter schools; proposed charter districts must specify alternative public school attendance arrangements for pupils residing within the school district who choose not to attend charter schools; and the district-wide charter petition must be approved by joint action of the Superintendent of Public Instruction and the State Board of Education (California Charter Schools Act of 1992). Charters may not exceed five years, although they can be renewed for periods of five years.

Florida: Broad Strokes, New Relationships. By way of contrast, two of Florida's large districts have crafted a different relationship with the state--but the freedoms they enjoy are not open to all districts in the state.

The School District of Hillsborough County, one of Florida's large charter districts, has 168,000 students and approximately 23,000 employees. The district ranges from very urban to a vast suburban population to a rural, agriculturally dominated population. The fastest-growing population is Hispanic, at approximately 21.5%, with a Caucasian population of 50%, an African American population of 24%, and the remaining population a wide range of different nationalities. This latter population has a pronounced need for English language services.

Its assistant superintendent for instruction, Donnie Evans, says

there were three main reasons the district sought and gained charter status. The first, he says, was tied directly to the desire to improve the performance of students and schools.

"We wanted to find ways to think outside the box," he notes. "Obstacles in our state statutes prevented us from doing that. We wanted waivers, but prior to the time when districts could gain charter status in our state, each waiver had to be requested on a statute-by-statute basis."

This cumbersome way of seeking freedom from regulation, he adds, made charter district status additionally appealing. "We also wanted to have the freedom that charter schools have," Evans observes, "their flexibility."

And finally, he adds that part of the move to charter district status had little to do with statutes but a great deal to do with paradigms. "History limits us," he says. "This can be a very big problem, getting away from the type of thinking that believes that things must be done the same way just because they always have been done that way."
The district's new freedom can be seen in modest examples of coursetaking flexibility previously prohibited by Florida state statutes. "We wanted to connect with kids at risk," Evans emphasizes, "and we felt the statutes limited that."

While the district has a strong teacher union, it now is exploring alternative certification and has been freed to do so under its charter status. Evans emphasizes that the planning team that worked on the district's application for charter status was carefully composed to include representatives from unions, the business community, instructional staff, local universities, and administrators--to ensure maximum buy-in and minimal conflict.

These individuals were appointed by their groups. Principals' councils at each level--elementary, middle, and high school--appointed individual representatives, as did the teachers' union and another collective bargaining unit.

Changing the district's relationship with the state was the primary thrust of the team's work from the beginning, Evans observes. "We are working now in both finances and human resources to get more authority for each to the principals," he adds.

While principals have the authority to hire staff after a district human resources screening, he would like to see principals with additional authority over their budgeting. This, he believes, can be accomplished with the district's move to charter status.

The biggest surprise, Evans says, was achieving charter district status, which he sees in some ways as incompatible with traditionally held values. "This district is so traditional," he emphasizes, "that it was surprising we were able to do this."

But it is difficult to see what is particularly innovative in the district's current practices, or what runs contrary to tradition except for the release from some state requirements. The district, despite its charter status, does not have open enrollment. Recent court decisions have led it to unitary status as a school system, or a plan to end court-ordered busing. As unitary status is phased in

throughout the district, by 2004 a limited version of choice will be available to district students and their parents. Hillsborough County refers to this plan as "controlled choice," through which parents may choose a school within their region or zone, but assignment is controlled by available space.

Why aren't more districts moving to charter status? Evans believes that traditional patterns of behavior and beliefs inhibit more districts from taking such action. "People are hesitant to challenge traditions," he says, "and it may be that charter districts are considered an offshoot of charter schools. There are a lot of people who are not supportive of charter schools."

Evans believes that several districts will apply for charter status, primarily to change their relationships with the state--but the number of total charter districts permissible by Florida law is six. As for its innovative qualities, he believes charter district status has considerable potential. "We don't have an excuse any more not to perform," he says. "For that reason, it has the potential to outweigh any effort in this district."

Florida law allows charter schools districts to apply for exemptions from state statutes except for those that deal with the election of school boards, teacher unions, public meetings and records, financial disclosure, conflict-of-interest, and "sunshine" laws (those laws that govern open meetings). In return, charter districts must establish performance goals, assessment measures for those goals, and a time frame to meet performance goals.

Georgia: A Five-Year Plan, Then Business as Usual. In Georgia, the Cartersville City School System in Cartersville has had a different experience: five years as a charter district followed by a return to regular district status. Superintendent Mike Bryans describes his district as one that serves approximately 3,600 students with a previously high track record of academic achievement. The district's demographics include a growing Hispanic population of approximately 11%, with an additional 28% classified loosely as "minority."

Cartersville City wanted more funds from the state; it also did not want to mandate an instructional approach or method from the central office. As the district sought charter status, each school wrote individual charters for their own relationships with the district. In essence, rather than fight a battle for charter district legislation, the district used existing state charter school legislation to gain charter district status.

While each school was unique, according to Bryans, there were common themes: increased parental involvement, along with leadership and maximum buy-in from all stakeholders. Another benefit, he adds, was a clear articulation of what the district wanted to accomplish within five years.

Basic changes included scheduling shifts and a restructuring at the elementary level to allow small group instruction. To accomplish this, other classes increased their size--classes such as art and music. Reading groups with a maximum of 12 students were constructed, along with 80 different levels of proficiency. With additional funds that the district received from the state as a consequence of becoming a charter district, staff development

monies were allocated to train teachers in the method they wanted: direct instruction.

Bryans emphasizes that teachers wanted to move to a direct instruction approach, describing it as "very scripted with lots of structure." Could this shift to direct instruction have been accomplished without charter district status?

"Certainly," he concedes, "and we could have accomplished lots of goals without the charter."

As the years of the five-year charter progressed, the state of Georgia moved to embrace some of the changes the district had instituted as part of their charter. School councils, for example, once innovative, now are state-mandated.

Bryans emphasizes that when the district had charter status, "We looked the same. We smelled the same. But we continued to see improvement, perhaps two to three percentile points on standardized tests."

Apart from the injection of state funds the Cartersville City district received, Bryans describes the benefits of charter status as political. "The beauty of it," he says, "is that we didn't have to mandate anything--it all came from our staff."

New Mexico: A Lonely Struggle for Reform. The sole charter district in New Mexico has fought a long battle to gain charter status. A relatively young district, it has been in existence for seven years--and once was suffused with deep citizen dissatisfaction with public schools.

A suburban system of 50,000 people, this district, according to its superintendent Sue Cleveland, "was born in revolution." For example, a substantial (35%) Hispanic population was adamant about implementing more successful approaches to bilingual education approach, with parents lining up to demand new assessment models and alternatives for their children. A relatively small, fluctuating population of Native American students (3-7%), and a correspondingly fluctuating population of African American students (3-7%) also provides diversity. The remainder of the student population is Anglo.

In this fast-growing community, Cleveland was frustrated by inflexible state regulations that made it increasingly difficult for the district to realize its goals. Intrigued with charter district status, she became a key part of the effort to influence and encourage the creation of legislation that would permit districts to move to charter status.

"We felt very constrained by the state," Cleveland explains. "And some state department officials fought us very hard as we moved to chartering the district. The state board, on the other hand, sensed the need for changes, and were willing to give us this opportunity."
The application process was arduous, culminating in a municipal election. In addition, it was necessary to achieve a two-thirds affirmative union-supervised vote. "We ran the election," she says, "like a bond campaign. We have a four and a half-year charter but we must return to the state board in two years to report on

progress."

While charter status might appear to offer this district considerable latitude, the superintendent describes it as a hard-won process of tough negotiations. "We didn't get the flexibility from the state that we really wanted," she notes. "We negotiated with the state department every step of the way, but we certainly did not get everything we felt we needed--and in some cases, needed desperately."

The biggest positive change, Cleveland reports, is psychological. "Staff feel we are not doing business as usual. We have greater responsibility to solve our own problems but we have more flexibility than before."

She describes previous efforts to work with the state as a Catch-22. "The State Department of Education would identify outcomes, specify materials, specify methods, and in some cases, would establish financial constraints. But when the outcome wasn't very good, they would ask what the district was doing wrong."

Cleveland emphasizes a key point. "When you allow people to use their best judgment, only then can you hold people accountable." This district has open enrollment as required by New Mexico, with waiting lists of students at every school. However, this has resulted in some local hostility. "Parents resent people who don't pay taxes here and enroll their children in our district," she acknowledges. "And sometimes families come here when their children have been in serious trouble somewhere else."

Part of the open enrollment process includes blanket permission to teachers to enroll their children, regardless of where teachers live. "A lot of residents don't like that," the superintendent added, "but obtaining and retaining good staff is critical to our efforts."

Site-based management exists, but not at the most far-reaching levels. "Principals can hire staff, within union constraints, but some financial decisions are limited because of scarce funding and regulatory constraints."

The biggest surprise, Cleveland reports, was the polarization that developed, the extremes in emotions about the proposed charter. "Some people saw a nefarious plot," she says. "On the other hand, the business community was strongly in favor of the charter."

She also points to heightened accountability for the district. "We have to report on our progress more frequently than any other district in the state. We have had significant successes in improving student achievement but obviously we won't abandon what has brought us success before."

Major changes on the agenda include a hard look at bilingual education and how well it serves the needs of the students. "We are rebuilding our bilingual programs," Cleveland says.

But could the district have made these changes without becoming a charter district? "Yes, but it would have been slower" she says. "We now have total control of our instructional materials, some financial flexibility, and more control over the school-day structure. We see enormous promise in this movement, more so than charter

schools which seem dependent on the individual school leader and the parents to provide a direction for the school.

She adds, "A charter district is different. When districts are well-run, fewer charter schools may need to develop. When districts are well-run, they provide services and support to their administrators and teachers so they can do their work and focus on their main task of teaching and learning."

She ponders one question. "Why give all this wonderful freedom to a charter school and not to a charter district? If we can make a difference at the school level, think what differences we can make at the district level."

As a superintendent, Cleveland admits that she is reform-oriented. "I will get there without it," she concludes, "but charter status is a tool that facilitates this process."

Yet New Mexico's legislation is far from encouraging. Only three "pilot" charter districts are permitted by state law: large, medium, and small, respectively.

New Mexico's application process would discourage all but the hardiest superintendents. The local school board first applies for a charter to the state board. As is typical of charter schools, this application must include the mission of proposed district, evidence that the charter is educationally and economically sound, an explanation of new relationships between personnel and the district, and a list of waivers requested from state board rules.

If the application is approved by the local and state boards, the district then must hold a municipal election, posing the question of charter district status to the community. A majority vote must be gained. In addition, 65% of school district employees must sign a petition in support of charter district status. If the election and petition are secured, the charter cannot exceed six calendar years--but Rio Rancho received only four calendar years. Department of education personnel visit the district "at least once each year" in an evaluative role. The charter can be revoked or the district placed on probationary status--although the district will not cease to operate.

Texas: Legislation, But No Charter Districts To Date. Texas has legislation that permits "home-rule school district charters," but this legislation is loaded with caveats. Probably as a consequence, there are no charter districts in Texas.

The applications process is laborious. First, a district's school board appoints a charter commission for the purpose of developing a charter if at least 5% of the registered voters of the district sign a petition for that purpose. In addition, at least two-thirds of the board's members must adopt a resolution ordering the appointment of a charter commission.

If those conditions are met, 15 district residents are appointed to the commission to reflect the racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and geographic diversity of the district. A majority of the 15 residents must be parents of school-age children attending the district's public schools. And at least 25% must be classroom teachers selected by the representatives of the professional staff (unions).

The charter must meet the specifications of the state legislation, which are typical of requirements of prospective charter schools. Upon completion, the charter commission submits the proposed charter to the secretary of state, who determines if the proposed charter changes the governance of the school district.

If it does, the secretary of state notifies the school board in the district, which must submit the proposed change to the United States Department of Justice or the United States District Court for the District of Columbia for preclearance under the Voting Rights Act.

The charter commission also submits the proposed charter to the commissioner for legal review. Modifications, if any, are suggested and the charter is changed to reflect these recommendations. If the commissioner does not act within the prescribed time frame, the charter is approved.

But the process does not end there. After the home-rule school district charter is approved, the district's school board must order an election on the proposed charter. Tight regulations govern this election. To be approved, a majority of the voters of the district must vote in favor of the charter. Moreover, the election is ineffectual unless at least 25% of the district's registered voters vote in whatever election has the adoption of the charter on the ballot.

Almost any superintendent would hesitate before embarking on such a laborious process. In its efforts to avoid bureaucratic rules and regulations, the very process of applying for release from such regulation seems to involve more trouble than the freedom may be worth. A superintendent's time conceivably could be devoted to the process of shepherding the district through approval--which is not assured, and may net only modest autonomy if granted.

The Evidence: Charter Districts and AASA Members
Key threads run through widely differing districts. These strands, which we will summarize in this section, can be described as:

- The weight of tradition;
- Conservative, parent-held values;
- A desire for the appearance of change;
- A need for politically safe reform; and
- Restrictive legislation that negates the concept that underpins charter districts and assures their failure.

We noted that most superintendents spoke of the bonds of tradition that permeated their very different communities and districts. From a rebellious small district in California that fought state control to a huge Florida district with sprawling borders and dizzying student diversity, superintendents emphasized the need to overcome tradition and do something new.

Yet are charter districts innovative? Are they truly something new? Or are they something comfortable that appeases conservative values and a desire to legitimize the status quo? While these districts enjoy some freedoms from state rules and regulations, in most states these releases could be obtained through an

admittedly painstaking process of applying for waivers. In actuality, charter districts appear to be a strange hybrid of tradition grafted onto conservative values and parental hostility toward public education--all components that have been tapped into successfully by advocates of charter schools.

Another irony about charter districts is inherent in superintendents' battles with tradition to find something new. In reality, when superintendents spoke about battling tradition, they found their strongest support for chartering their districts in the roots of traditional beliefs and values in their districts. Charter district status became a politically adroit way to honor stakeholders, to include them in some kind of decisionmaking process (although not as substantive as a districtwide reform endeavor), and to respect their input.

Parents, similarly, were charged with signing compacts and charters for new roles and responsibilities with the districts in which their children attended school. Yet in most cases, these compacts lacked credibility and could be violated at any time. Again, there is a "feel good" aspect to this type of parental involvement--an initial rush of good will toward the district's "new" campaign, followed by the detritus of waning enthusiasm once the meeting schedule loses its intensity.

Parents, PTA members, union presidents (if applicable), and other constituents all have the opportunity to *feel* that something massive has been accomplished--when in reality, as superintendents admitted, any reform under consideration could have occurred without charter district status.

The biggest benefit to charter school districts, we concluded, is the opportunity they offer a wide array of constituents to express their points of view, buy into a change process, and enjoy the emotions that accompany the thrill of "being innovative." However, there is "pick your battles" approach to this issue.

Superintendents interested in charter district status need to evaluate carefully whether they should advocate for legislation that will allow charter districts to thrive--or whether they want to seek charter status if legislation in their states permits charter districts. Either decision could be expensive in terms of resources expended for benefits gained.

If superintendents decide to advocate for legislation that would permit charter districts a broader scope with considerable autonomy, there are no good models of such legislation. Legislation that would permit charter districts to expand and thrive awaits development. Do superintendents want to invest themselves in the development of this legislation--or is their valuable time best spent in other endeavors?

Or if superintendents decide chartering their districts is possible under state law, they should ask themselves what they intend to accomplish after gaining the charter and if there is a shorter route that will allow them to accomplish the same goals. Should they spend precious resources trying to gain charter district status if the freedoms are largely symbolic or not sufficiently broad?

State legislation currently does not allow the relaxed freedoms this

movement needs to flourish--even at the pilot level. Unless state policymakers take note, chartering entire districts will remain a largely symbolic action--one that superintendents might be well-advised to avoid so they can invest their energies in actions that will pay greater dividends.

Charter Districts Nationwide
Alvina Elementary School District
Caruthers, CA

Cartersville City Public Schools
Cartersville, GA (charter district status 1996-2001)

Delta View Joint Union Elementary School District
Hanford, CA

Hickman Elementary School District
Hickman, CA

Hillsborough County Public Schools
Tampa, FL

Kingsburg Elementary Charter School District
Kingsburg, CA

Pioneer Union School District
Hanford, CA

Rio Rancho Public Schools
Rio Rancho, NM

Volusia County Schools
Deland, FL

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